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SUBJECT: PRT: PANJSHIR: MASSOUD COMMEMORATION DRAWS PEACEFUL CROWD

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The ceremony for slain mujahideen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, held September 10 in Panjshir, attracted some five thousand people and went off peacefully. U.S. participants included Ambassador Neumann and CJTF-76 Commanding General, Major General Freakley. The event had many dimensions: Massoud commemoration, Panjshir pilgrimage, national reflection and mujahideen reunion. It also had positive side-effects. It strengthened provincial capacity, especially in terms of planning and security; highlighted the importance of the reconstructed road; led to reconciliation between Governor Bahlul and NDS Director Saleh; and bolstered Panjshir-Kabul governmental ties. End Summary.

Large Crowds and Special Guests

¶2. (SBU) September 9 marked the fifth anniversary of the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud. Thousands gathered September 10 in Panjshir, next to his tomb and not far from his home. According to the Governor, the crowd totaled around five thousand people, &for Panjshir the largest gathering in memory.⁸ The majority of them were former mujahideen from inside the valley; but many Afghans from other provinces also attended. Our contacts report that two factors helped draw the big crowd: the importance of &martyred⁸ Massoud and the prospect of a free lunch.

¶3. (SBU) Visitors from Kabul included those with Panjshiri roots such as First VP Massoud, Ambassador to Great Britain Ahmed Wali Massoud, Senators Fahim Khan and Mohammed Arif Sarwari, NDS Director Saleh and Army Chief of Staff Bismallah Khan. GOA ministers and parliamentarians also attended. U.S. visitors included Ambassador Neumann, MG Freakley (CJTF-76), acting USAID mission director Carl Abdou Rahmaan and COL Schlatter (Task Force Tiger, CJTF-76). The Senior Civilian Representative, Ambassador Everts, represented NATO/ISAF. The Governor told us that Embassy representatives were present from Iran, Russia and Tajikistan as well.

Themes and Special Nod to the U.S.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the usual speeches, the official program provided for chanted tributes to Massoud, often punctuated with shouts of approval from former comrades in the audience. Governor Bahlul, head of the planning committee, led off with words of welcome before turning -- &a deliberate political decision,⁸ he told us) to the U.S. Ambassador. In his remarks, the Ambassador cited the

USAID-funded road construction in Panjshir as a symbol of opportunity, connection to the outside world, and fulfillment of a pledge made at last year's anniversary. He also called on Afghans to overcome their internal divisions in order to deal better with the challenges facing the country. VP Massoud echoed this last theme, emphasizing the importance of all Afghans pulling together in developing their democracy. In his speech, SCR Everts said Afghans should continue the Massoud legacy of seeking a peaceful, democratic, prosperous Afghanistan.

PRT Support for Event

15. (SBU) The PRT had worked closely with provincial officials to help plan the event, which, in terms of magnitude, has a unique place in the Panjshir calendar. The PRT coordinated on security arrangements, transportation modalities, invitation issuance and program elements. After the event, the Governor dropped by to express his gratitude for the teamwork) as well as to inform us of his decision to attend a 9/11 commemoration at Bagram hosted by MGEN Freakley. He said his attendance in Bagram was &symbolically fitting,8 given the Afghan and American experience in September 2001.

Comment

16. (SBU) The event was well organized, apart from the traffic jam at its conclusion. It had many dimensions: Massoud commemoration, Panjshir pilgrimage, national reflection and mujahideen reunion. It also had various

positive spinoffs. For example, it strengthened provincial administrative capacity through the intense planning in the run-up. It helped integrate into the provincial security team the new Chief of Police, who had been somewhat of an outsider since his arrival this spring. It brought back former Foreign Minister Abdullah, who has been absent from his Panjshiri estate for months but returned to host the September 10 lunch. It highlighted the importance of the reconstructed main road, used by thousands traveling up and down the valley on September 10. It led to a personal reconciliation of Governor Bahlul and NDS Director Saleh, two Panjshiris who have been feuding lately but agreed at the ceremony to let bygones be bygones. Finally, it bolstered the Panjshir-Kabul connection, one of the weak points in terms of good governance, through the Kabul police reinforcements and the many GOA visitors.
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